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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence is defined as "...the ability to use appropriate speech for the circumstances, and when deviating from what is normal to convey what is intended." A study was undertaken to show that children's sociolinguistic communicative competencies and incompetencies can be identified and described in components of the "Ways of Speaking." Using an ethnograhic design, data were collected in a middle-class kindergarten consisting of 21 white, native English speakers during a period of four months. Children's ways of speaking were examined and aspects of their sociolinguistic competence and incompetence were identified. Speech samples were examined in the following categories: setting or scene, participants, ends or goals, act sequences, key or tone, instrumentalities, norms of interaction, and genres. The competencies discovered included the ability to vary artfully the components of "Ways of Speaking" in order to accomplish a range of personal purposes and awareness of regularities in classroom language. The problems in acculturation had to do with requisite norms of interaction, participant role as unintended hearers when the teacher addressed remarks to a subgroup, and sometimes attracting and maintaining interest of their audience. (AMH)

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Communicative Competence of Kindergarten Children: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

by

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Communicative Competence of Kindergarten Children:

A Sociolinguistic Perspective

The Problem

At present, only a limited understanding of the full range of children's communicative competence from a sociolinguistic perspective exists. Previous assessments have depended on measures such as linguistic complexity as revealed on paper and pencil tests (Loban, 1976), control of features of the language that create and maintain social organization (Cicourel, Jennings, Jennings, Leiter, MacKay, Mehan, & Roth, 1974; Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz, 1976), child responses during teacher-directed lessons (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979), participation rates during teacher-directed lessons (Bremme & Erickson, 1977), and children's approximation to a teacher's preferred style (Michaels & Cook-Gumperz, 1979). Sociolinguists such as Labov (1972) suggest, however, that the display of communicative competence varies according to the situation, the topic, and the participants involved. School classes do ordinarily include several types of activities which present a variety of speech demands for children. Therefore, observation and analysis of children's language production across all speech events can provide a basis for a more complete assessment of communicative competence. Communicative competence is defined as "...the ability to use appropriate speech for the circumstances, and when deviating from what is normal to convey what is intended" (Ervin-Tripp, 1969). When a kindergarten class is chosen, some estimate of children's entry level skills may be made. The purpose of this research is to reveal competencies and incompetencies not previously identified and to report them in a way useful for classroom teachers, curriculum planners and future researchers.

Theoretical Framework

To capture the full range of children's communicative competence, a broad theoretical framework is needed. It was found that Hymes's (1972) Ways of Speaking provided a sufficiently inclusive framework. The components of Ways of Speaking are subsumed

under the acronym SPEAKING. S refers to the situation or scene; P to the participants, E to the ends or goals, A to act sequences, K to key, I to instrumentalities, N to norms of interaction and G to genres. According to Hymes (1972):

> A shift in any of the components of speaking may mark the presence of a rule (or structured relation), e.g. from normal tone of voice to whisper, from formal English to slang, correction, praise, embarrassment, withdrawal, and other evaluative responses to speech may indicate the violation or accomplishment of a rule. In general, one can think of any change in a component as a potential locus for a "sociolinguistic" commutation test: What relevant contrast, if any, is present? (p. 65f)

It will be shown that children's sociolinguistic communicative competencies and incompetencies can be identified and described in terms of Hymes's components of the Ways of Speaking.

Methods and Procedures

Using an ethnographic design, data were collected in a middle-class kindergarten consisting of 21 white, native English speakers during a period of four months. Ethnic, class, and language factors were homogeneous among the children, the teacher, and the researcher. The researcher acted as a participant observer, audio-taping entire sessions. The audio-tapes were meticulously transcribed and analyzed repeatedly for emergent categories indicative of communicative competence. Sociolinguistic, linguistic, social, and cognitive categories comprised the final set of categories. This paper reports the competencies and incompetencies that were identified within the sociolinguistic category.

Results

Children's Ways of Speaking were examined. Several aspects of kindergarten children's sociolinguistic competence and incompetence were identified. These included problems of acculturation, successes in communication, and awareness of regularities in the language used in the classroom. Speech samples arranged according to Hymes's components of Ways of Speaking were selected to illustrate competencies not previously identified.

Setting or scene

According to Hymes (1972), setting refers to the time and place of a speech act, and in general to the physical circumstances. "Scene...designates the psychological setting or the cultural definition of an occasion as a certain type of scene." The influence of this factor was demonstrated by the change in fluency of Tamie according to her definition of the scene. Tamie's contributions in the classroom situation had been minimal. However in an informal setting with the examiner and a peer, Tamie exploded into fluent, colloquial discourse. Her talk was peppered with fillers such as "Come on now, you know what I mean" and feminist slogans such as "You just stay out of woman's stuff" and a song, "Because I'm a Woman". Several other songs enriched the episode. Tamie has interpreted the situation to be one where special female registers, slang, and genre such as songs are appropriate. This example recalls Labov's discovery of black children's fluency under informal congenial situations. However, here we have an indication that the situational factor also operated in a homogeneous middle-class classroom.

Participants

Participants include the speaker, the addressee and the audience, whether intended or not. The kindergarten children manifested several kinds of incompetencies in dealing with their classroom participant roles. Some children did not understand the teacher's use of cautionary vocatives:*

T: Kenneth, Stanley, look here!
Ke: What do you mean Kenneth-Stanley? I'm Kenneth.

The kindergarten children also failed to understand their participant role as unintended hearers when the teacher addressed the whole group but targeted a subgroup for her remarks.

T: Will you put your chairs in.
Jo: I wasn't sitting on a chair.
T: Well, push it in anyway please.

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*In the following examples, T: stands for teacher, Ch(n): for unidentified child, Ke: for identified child.

T: Put your sharing things away.
Ch: I can't put--how can I take off my jump suit.
Am: Then I'll put my skirt in my cubby hole. #laughter#
Sh: Ok, I'll take off my clothes.

These comments caused the teacher to amend her request with, "unless you're wearing it" but to no avail as the children then said:

Ch: Ok, then I'll have to take off my head.
Ch: And I will put my teeth away.

There are alternative explanations of this common occurence in kindergarten: five year old children are egocentric, or over-literal. The advantage in casting the problem into the participant component of Ways of Speaking is that a remedy is implied, namely the teacher can make explicit her purpose or the audience she is targeting.

Ends or goals

Ends encompass the outcomes and goals from the perspective of the group as well as from that of the individuals involved. The ends of the various participants may be in conflict. A recurring goal of the kindergarten children was that comments should relate new information. One index of this goal was the jarring "I know that" supplied in the midst of conversation. For example:

T: You're back. How are you?
Br: I know. I was sick.
T: I'm so glad.

Another index was the refusal to say the obvious:

Ad: I got a truck and it had a tire that comes off and another tire goes on.
T: Is that right?..How many wheels does it have.
Ad: How mostly truck is supposed to have.

The quest for novelty was most apparent in Sharing Time.:

Ta: My working pants.
T: Your working pants. Do you know your working pants have words on them? Know what they say?
Ch: She shared those before.
Ch: She haven't shared those before.
T: This one says--

Ch: Yes, she have.
T: And this one says brushes.
Ch: you shared your pants before.
T: What do you suppose you are, if you've got brushes?
Ch: Painter.

With this last question, the teacher succeeded in arousing the interest of the audience by switching to a new angle. Tamie however gave no indication of competence. The teacher's goal for Sharing Time was that the child talk before the group. However, the goal of the child's audience was that the item be interesting. This conflict in goals is one of the explanations for the reluctance of children to speak fluently in this speech event.

Communicative competence for Sharing Time consisted of the ability to create and maintain the interest of the peer audience. Some children indicated their awareness of this principle by secreting their objects until the dramatic moment. Others gave intentionally misleading clues. The most reliable method depended on the ability to vary artfully the components of Ways of Speaking. To manifest this competency, the children, not the teacher, must have the opportunity to cope with their audience's reaction. During the course of this research, the teacher altered her structure for Sharing Time to allow for children's conversation without teacher input. Thereafter children did their own rescuing. For instance, Carmen shared her shirt under both conditions. We can compare her contributions and show that the second condition allowed Carmen to display competency:

1)Ca: My shirt.
T: Isn't that nice. Candy, flowers and ladybug and grass...
Ca: Uh huh.
T: Great. It goes very nice with your pants.
Ca: Thank you.

2)Ca: My, my lady bug shirt.
Ch: You already shared that.
Ca: Uh uh.
Ch: Well we seent it.
Ca: I wore it. And guess who got it for me. Guess, guess what, who gave it to me. My Aunt X, Uncle Y and Aunt Z and Darby and Frances and Jenkin and Millie. They were all together so they all bought it for me. And my mom and dad.

Carmen's success here rested on the shift of content of the message, which is a

component of the Ways of Speaking. We will turn next to that component.

Act Sequences

Act sequences deal with the message including its form and its content. Several children varied the form of their messages by using exaggerated starts such as, "Guess what", "Shut your eyes", "Well, I bet you'll give me a little help cutting this." These children succeeded in attracting their audience. Another valuable competency was the ability to shift the content of a message as was done during Sharing Time in order to create interest. Content shifts had other purposes. For instance, a content shift could cover for ignorance:

T: Brent, which ocean is your uncle on?
Br: The ocean we saw in Los Angeles. That's the one he's in.
T: Do you know what that ocean is called?
Br: I think the Pacific.
T: That's exactly right. It's biggest ocean in the world.
Br: I know, but that's the ocean the Statue of Liberty's on.
T: No. the Statue of Liberty's on the Atlantic.
Br: Oh, yeah. But streams attach onto oceans.

Also, a shift in content was used to amend a violation of norms of interaction. In the following example, a child changes the content of a potion in deference to the age of the recipient:

So: Would you like some poison stuff? #offered to researcher#
P: Yes...um. Tastes like poison...
So: A couple of drinks, you will die. Ae Ae Ae #witch voice#
Lo: Now ask that old lady if she'd like a cup of water.
So: Would you like a cup of water?...Excuse me, we're the witches and witches, tee hee hee- #witch voice#

Recall of the exact form of messages was another competency identified in this classroom. This metalinguistic ability is an important aspect of communicative competence, since the recall of form as well as content in a message is fundamental to the construction by the child of sociolinguistic regularities. For example, Tracy, in seeking another snack, said:

Tr: I wish I could have another.
T: I think we can have just one a customer.
Sh: You always say that.
T: I know.

In fact the previous conversation had been:

Tr: We could split this one.
T: Sorry, just one per customer.

The children often indicated annoyance when their message was not recalled by others indicating an expectation of competence in recall:

Ka: Where'd you get the octopus?
Sh: My sister made it for me. I told you in the first place, (silly), Kathy, dummy.

In fact Sharon's opening statement had been:

Sh: It's an octopus and my sister made it for me for Hanukka.

A final example of metalinguistic awareness of content and form of customary discourse comes from Kenneth.

Ke: You ask me when I'm doing something important, I just say, "Wait a minute, later on." If they ask me more than one time, I'm going to do it. But you only asked me once.

Key

Key refers to the "tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done." Competence with key shifts is a valuable asset, but not one that all kindergarten children possessed. For instance, Joseph while sharing a well-known toy switched to slang with humorous effect and audience approval.

Jo: The arms can come off and so can the cape.
Tr: I knew that.
Jo: So can the arms.
Ch: Then his arms. #mockingly#
Jo: Then his knucklehead. #laughter#

Another child regularly used a key shift into the genre of word play to recover from mistakes.

Br: Drill it, Wyman.
Wy: He's not Wyman.
Br: I know, crazy.
Wy: They why'd you call him Wyman?
Br: I forgot his name, crazy.
Wy: You're crazy.
Br: You're crazy.
Wy: Ok, you're crazy.

Br: You're crazy
Wy: You're crazy
Br: You're nazy, crazy, crazy tazy.

A few minutes later, Brent made another mistake: he violated a taboo, a societal norm of interaction. He recovered with the same key-genre shift:

Wy: Everything I make my brother destroys.
Br: How come?
Wy: Cause he likes it. He likes destroying
Br: I'm kidding, Daniel. Why do you have to get so crazy?
Wy: Yeah, mazy.
Br: Yeah, dazy.
Wy: I hope my brother doesn't...my brother won't ever, won't be able to get that off.

In addition this kind of word-play and key shift was used to counteract boredom. This example surfaced during an assigned activity.

Jo: Hi, Brent, Sir Kent.
Br: Hi, Joe.
Jo: Hi, Pupu Sir...Hi, snowflake
Br: I'm not a snowflake.
Jo: You are.
Br: No, not snowflake.
Jo: You're a turkey then, you're a hippopotamus. You're a leaf, then you're a hiccup..then you're a bird.
Br: Joe!
Jo: Hi, hicco.
Br: Hi, hiccup.
Jo: Hi, turkey.
Br: Hi, horse.

Although the teacher labeled these key shifts 'silly', it is clear that they were an important aspect of communicative competence in the five years olds' world.

Instrumentalities

Instrumentalities refer to channels such as written or oral and modes such as singing or whispering and forms of speech such as codes, varieties and registers. In the following example, Betsy competently chose a Donald Duck voice and a baby register to cover her worry about

appropriateness of her question. Betsy took advantage of a teacher pause to ask the researcher.

Be: What are you doing? #Donald Duck voice#
P: Writing down what you say
Be: That's what the baby asked

Children indicated communicative competence by the range of modes they controlled such as singing and whispering, and by their handling of various registers during dramatic play. In the written channel, competency was demonstrated by curiosity and active seeking of adult help in deciphering words.

Norms of Interaction

Norms include rules of interaction such as not interrupting, turn-taking,as well as the use of features appropriate to the pertinent social structure such as politeness. The kindergarten children lacked competence with school norms of interaction such as turn-taking and using an inside voice. On the other hand, the children showed awareness of other norms by making specific metalinguistic comments. For instance, Kathy described the norms for address forms in our society:

Ka: Did you see my mother go by?
P: Yes. That was a surprise to see your mother in school.
Ka: Her name is Marie.
Ch: Marie?
Ka: But you guys call her Mrs. Jones, 'cept for the big people. I call her mother, 'cause she's my mother.

Also, Betty indicated her understanding of the politeness formula by engaging in this catechism:

Ka: I need that for a minute
Be: No.
Ka: Do I have to ask you?
Be: Yes.
Ka: May I please use it?

Be: What's the magic word?
Ka: I don't know
Be: You said it a minute ago. Please, dumb-dumb #whispers the appellation#
Ka: Please!
Be: And after you're done with it, say thank-you and hand it back, Ok?

Brent showed awareness of stylistic co-occurrence, that certain words are restricted to certain environments.

Jo: #shares his baby book with photographs#
Ca: He was cute. He still is cute.
Br: Joe is cute. Then he'd still be a baby.

Similarly, many children objected to the use of familial address terms such as honey, dear, and sweetie in the school environment, except of course in the housecorner. These examples indicate that the children have well-developed sociolinguistic concepts.

Hymes's framework thus captures what children do know as well as what they don't know. Previous school ethnographies (Green & Wallat, 1981) have been restricted to children's learning of school norms of interaction. For an adequate description of children's communicative competence with this component a wider range of norms of interaction must be considered.

Genres

Genres include "categories such as poem, myth, talk, ...etc". Kindergarten genres are less sophisticated, but they do exist. In the following example, Joseph and Kathy do a parody of reporting news upon entrance to school. It is interesting that Tracy fails to make the shift into a humorous context. He remains literal throughout.

Jo: Did you run?
Tr: Yeah.
Jo: On your bottom?
Ka: On your head?
Jo: On your feet?
Tr: On my feet?
Ka: Where's your feet?
Tr: Down there, #points#

Jo: No, your feet are up here, #points, laughs#
Ka: Yeah, there they are.

Genre shifts were particularly effective during Sharing Time for attracting and maintaining the interest of the audience. In one example, Amber chose a guessing game format for the presentation of her new dress. In another, Stanley made a mislabeling mistake and fell into a genre of calling things their opposites with a humorous effect:

St: My hat. #shows coat#
Sh: That's not a hat.
St: My coat, I mean. #chuckles#
Ch: He called his coat, a hat.
St: My big giant coat. #shows hat#
Ch: And called his hat, a coat
St: And big giant hat...#shows coat#

The teacher cut off Sharing Time abruptly at this point. She explained to me she thought Stanley was being 'silly'.

Teachers need to become aware of the functional effectiveness of genre and other component shifts. They would then value the artful variations some children use spontaneously. Moreover, they could add speech communication instruction such as creating and maintaining audience interest to their curriculum.

In conclusion, the use of Hymes's components of Ways of Speaking as a framework for analysis of children's spontaneous speech demonstrates that children have "the ability to use appropriate speech for the circumstances, and when deviating from what is normal to convey what is intended". This is communicative competence on a broader scale that hitherto revealed.

Conclusions

Several aspects of kindergarten children's sociolinguistic competence and incompetence were identified. These included problems of acculturation, successes in communication, and awareness of regularities in the language used in the classroom.

Problems of Acculturation

Although these kindergarten children were shown to be learning the requisite norms of interaction, infractions were common. Moreover, some kindergarten children did not yet understand their participant role as unintended hearers when the teacher targeted a subgroup for her remarks. Also, some children had difficulty attracting and maintaining the interest of their audience whether teacher or peers. This is a problem with act sequences as well as one of key and genre. It was shown that a conflict of ends existed between the teacher and her students for some speech events. The children expected that the content of messages would be new information, whereas the teacher accepted old information and was concerned with the form of the message. It was apparent that these middle-class accomplished native speakers were experiencing difficulties adjusting to school Ways of Speaking. Since their problems could not be attributed to ethnic, class, or second language factors, they suggest a minimal set of difficulties that all children face upon entrance to school.

Successes in communication

Communicative competence included the ability to vary artfully the components of Ways of Speaking in order to accomplish a range of personal purposes. Children's ability to alter the message content, to shift to a joking key, and to use dramatic voice, for instance, was effective in maintaining audience interest.

Another aspect of communicative competence was the ability to recognize regularities in classroom language use. The regularities on which the children commented included stylistic features, participant structures, forms of greetings and address, norms of interaction for speaking, and precise recall of previous discourse.

Importance of the Study

Educational Implications

Teachers need to be alerted to the possibility of assessing communicative competence as it is displayed in school activities. The competencies identified herein could serve as a basis for such assessment. Curriculum planning could then be tailored to the competencies or incompetencies of the particular group of children. Also, awareness of the potential range of communicative competencies to be displayed should lead to the inclusion of more varied language activities in the classroom.

Research Implications

The competencies and incompetencies identified herein can serve as emergent hypotheses of their distribution among other populations. To assess communicative competence, authentic communication should be examined. Therefore, increased use of the participant observer feature of ethnography is indicated. The use of broad frameworks of analysis is recommended as a means of ascertaining the richness, variety, and complexity of children's sociolinguistic communicative competence.

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